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PACK IT UP

The latest trends in packaging. **BY CHARLIE POGACAR**

Sending a Message

Your packaging is speaking to your guests—do you know what it's saying?

Maybe there was a time when food-service operators could tell themselves that packaging wasn't a pivotal aspect of serving their guests. Maybe packaging was an area they tried to pinch pennies on so that they could focus on the food that they serve, but savvy and successful brands have long known that the two go hand-in-hand: A satisfying dining experience goes far beyond the tastebuds.

Besides, like most everything else in the industry, the idea that packaging was a place to save money has been turned upside down by COVID-19. As brands pivoted to off-premises only for months at a time, packaging became an even more integral part of brand messaging and the customer experience.

"As a result of the pandemic, the relevance of packaging has been elevated," says Fran Rizzo, director of marketing at **D&W Fine Pack**. "Packaging is now even more important as restaurants focus on maintaining the integrity of the food that they serve. The goal is to satisfy customers, so they trust the restaurant to provide great meals for take-out just like dining in."

Operators who had previously resisted committing to an investment in to-go containers, cups, and bags were faced with the daunting challenge of finding packaging that had a message—what was their packaging saying to the customer? Was it communicating safety, durability, and sustainability?

"The pandemic has forced quick-serve brands to re-examine the dine-in experience and has moved customer safety and worker safety to the forefront," says Thomas Buchberg, executive vice president of global operations at **GreenDustries**. "It's also increased the number of takeout



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SABERT CORPORATION, GREENDUSTRIES

orders that have to be packed to-go.”

And with the increase in off-premises ordering—and especially third-party delivery—the packaging is actually functioning as a lifeline for the operator.

“Remember, a delivery is potentially the only contact the consumer has with the concept upon receiving a food order,” says David Fredrickson, director of national accounts at **Huhtamaki**. “Packaging for

cially for take-out and delivery. Tamper-evident packaging offers a visible solution for foodservice operators and their customers concerned about the integrity of their foods and beverages. Additionally, no-touch packaging is being developed in order to provide a safe and hygienic option for customers.”

In fact, without a proper approach to packaging, off-premises ordering has a

Packaging. “A great food experience will lead to future orders and referrals on social media. Consumers also want the flexibility to preserve leftovers to reheat in a microwave.”

An added benefit to microwave-safe packaging? If it’s properly branded, that will get customers thinking about your brand again the next day.

“Oftentimes, operators will discover that exploring alternate substrates can help elevate their off-premise programs,” says Tomia Smith, vice president, national accounts sales at the **Sabert Corporation**. “We have also found that some of our innovations, like additional packaging dividers, can make all the difference in maintaining food integrity during the delivery process.”

Some of this might sound expensive, especially compared to traditional packaging options. But again, the pennies saved up front are not worth it in the long run, says Joe Kofler, president of **delfort USA**, because you’re showing the customer that you care about their health and safety.

“Packaging is ultimately the silent salesman,” Kofler says. “It’s an essential opportunity to showcase a brand’s identity, care, and ability to provide convenience for its consumers.”

Another fundamental way packaging speaks to customers about how much a brand cares about them is if the packaging is sturdy.

“One of the most common pain points from diners is packaging that leaks,” says Scott Rhea, director of engineering at D&W Fine Pack. “When the meal finally gets home after a long day at work, the last thing a consumer wants is to reach into a bag and find it’s wet because the sauce or juice leaked. Diners want leak-resistant packaging. A great base and lid design along with quality testing and production is critical to deliver leak resistance.”

Not all of this should fall on the operator’s shoulders—it’s important to acknowledge that packaging suppliers have a role to play, too. Operators can and should open up a line of communication with their packaging supplier and become educated about optimal practices. And on the other hand, the packaging supplier should



ANCHOR PACKAGING

Anchor Packaging

delivery needs to be functional, safe, and reflect positively on the brand.”

One of the biggest overall challenges for operators throughout 2020 has been establishing trust with consumers who are constantly being cautioned about the threat of an invisible virus. That has awoken a renewed awareness of food safety practices, and a huge component of brand loyalty has become whether or not the restaurant brand can establish trust with its following. Packaging is directly implicated in this battle, as it is the vessel that carries the food to the customer. Its appearance and structural integrity are now make-or-break propositions.

“While product safety has always been a concern for brands, the pandemic has increased the measures restaurants are taking to ensure safe food products and packaging for their customers,” says Kristin Reim, global product marketing manager at **Liquibox**. “Quick-service brands are seeking tamper-evident labeling and single-use packaging, espe-

“Diners expect that the food ordered for takeout, curbside pickup, or delivery will taste as good as what they enjoy when dining in the restaurant.”

real chance to do damage to a brand’s reputation. It’s been said a lot this year, but the biggest key to getting repeat off-premises sales is ensuring that food offerings hold up to a brand’s standards. Customers want food that tastes the same whether they’re dining in or dining out.

“Diners expect that the food ordered for takeout, curbside pickup, or delivery will taste as good as what they enjoy when dining in the restaurant,” says Marilyn Stapleton, director of marketing at **Anchor**


R3 Redistribution

“One of the most common pain points from diners is packaging that leaks.”

be able—and willing—to educate them.

“Packaging suppliers need to underscore what a package can and, in some cases, cannot do,” says Paul E. Smith, business and marketing integrator at **AFC Packaging**. “What temperatures can the packaging handle? How robust is the package? Is it tamper evident or tamper resistant? Does it protect against allergens? Does it keep food from being retouched prior to final service? Is there other prep necessary? Without engagement by the packaging manufacturer, the operator can be in the dark on a lot of features the package offers.”

Another value that packaging is able to communicate to guests is sustainability. With Gen Z and millennials making up an increasing block of restaurant patrons, environmental consciousness has grown along with them. In fact, there are current

grassroots campaigns throughout the U.S. that are connecting the dots between the pandemic and climate change—whether or not operators see that connection is irrelevant. Their consumers are looking to them to show a commitment to sustainability, and the packaging a restaurant chooses to use is the largest component of that messaging.

In that way, it’s especially important for brands to know who their customer base is and what they are looking for. For example, if a store is in an urban or notably liberal-leaning area, the chances are that its customer base is going to have sustainable practices high on a checklist of priorities.

“Packaging must resonate with the standards of a brand’s customer,” says Nathan Foxx, director of category management at **R3 Redistribution**. “For example, a restaurant in Malibu must use both functional and environmentally conscious packaging in order to be accepted by their clientele.”

Again, sustainable packaging isn’t the cheapest option, but that might change soon, Reim says.

“As these more sustainable materials become more widely used they will increase in scale, and the cost will eventually settle into where it makes more sense for an operator or brand owner to make the switch,” Reim says. “The good news is that there are operators leading the charge in bringing in more sustainable alternatives which will eventually drive others to do so as well.”

Finally, while Instagrammable packaging was a fun thing to think about prior to the pandemic, the surge of social media use and off-premises ordering means attractive, well-thought-out packaging is an absolute must now.

“Consumers are almost as interested in their experience as they are in the overall taste of the food, exhibited by their penchant for posting photos

and videos all over social media,” says Mark Schlossman, executive vice president of sales and marketing at **Accurate Box Company**. “We have seen some great successes with consumers promoting their favorite foods or brands simply by sharing photos and or videos online. It is in these situations where the printing and branding on the packaging will go a long way in putting a brand on the map.”

Whether brands like it or not, the packaging they use is sending a message to their customers, and at times, even those following their customers on social media. During a time in which so much is out of an operator’s control, it stands to reason that brands should take control of those limited things that they can.

“Packaging has the unique ability to make or break a brand’s reputation,” says Tomia Smith, vice president of national accounts sales at the Sabert Corporation. “From our experience, operators should find a partner in their packaging supplier that supports elevating their brand through packaging. Providing flexibility for customization to help operators get their message across is key.”

How to Implement a Packaging Strategy

Industry experts weigh in on the do's and don'ts.

With off-premises ordering at an all-time high, operators are finding that packaging presents an opportunity like never before. Implementing a packaging strategy that emphasizes the core values of a brand is a must, but not every operator has thought through all of the strengths and weaknesses of the bags, containers, cups, and utensils that help a brand connect with their customer base.

“Operators have to be asking themselves: How does our packaging play a supporting role for the star of the show—the food?” says Paul E. Smith, business and marketing integrator at **AFC Packaging**. “The package shouldn’t have any negative effects. It’s unrealistic to think that recyclability, compostability, sustainability—as well as protection against tampering and allergens—aren’t part of the equation for many consumers.”

In some ways, packaging is one of those things that is only noticed if it’s not working. Think about the off-premises journey in particular: The food might get cold, or the container might leak. A top might not fit a cup correctly, causing the customer to spill a soft drink inside their vehicle. That would most likely affect the way that customer viewed the brand thereafter.

“Now, more than ever, we hear about operators feeling the pressure to maintain food integrity throughout the delivery process,” says Tomia Smith, vice president, national accounts sales at the **Sabert Corporation**. “Packaging truly plays an integral role in ensuring an operator’s brand and reputation remain consistent on and off premises.”

For piece of mind, and the sake of the bottom line, operators must establish a relationship with their packaging sup-



“Operators have to be asking themselves: How does our packaging play a supporting role for the star of the show—the food?”

plier and find a brand they can trust. And if that relationship isn’t working at any point, there are plenty of other companies that might be a better fit. A brand should have confidence in the packaging product

it is putting out there in the same way it has confidence in its food.

“Operators should work closely with a box manufacturer to analyze their current packaging and to redesign or create new packaging,” says Mark Schlossman, executive vice president of sales and marketing at **Accurate Box Company**. “This way, operators will have confidence in their packaging to perform the way they need it to in order to benefit their restaurant workers and consumers.”

Packaging is also something that can be constantly tinkered with to achieve optimal results. Like other sectors of the industry, packaging technology is rapidly changing, and so are customer expecta-

tions—something that’s never been more evident than now. The packaging should be pivoting with those ever-evolving consumer needs.

“Packaging needs to be reviewed as often as the food on the menu,” says Marilyn Stapleton, director of marketing at **Anchor Packaging**. “Limiting or removing items from the menu because they don’t withstand the extra time required

“For many operators packaging is an afterthought and not considered when developing a new item,” says David Fredrickson, director of national accounts at **Huhtamaki**. “Packaging should be considered in the development process. If a chain is launching a new item or executing an LTO, it is important to have the right package to help ensure a successful launch or campaign.”

should also value how it’s packaged and served so that the customer can have the most enjoyable experience, creating repeat business and brand loyalty.”

There is also the matter of compliance with regulations, which might vary from location to location. For example, cities like San Francisco have long-since outlawed things like plastic bags and styrofoam containers.

“The use and dangers of PFAS have been clearly documented for years—fortunately, the FDA is now starting to take action in its removal,” says Joe Kofler, president of **delfort USA**. “Even chromium used in baking and cooking papers pose risks and are not a healthy solution.”

And it begs the question—even if a city or state allows for things like styrofoam packaging, does a customer base think less of a brand if they see it? When implementing a packaging plan, an operator has to put themselves in the shoes of their customers, which goes back to considering the guest’s journey, and impressions of the brand based on packaging.

“One of the biggest mistakes we see is having insubstantial packaging,” Schlossman says. “Consumers want packaging that withstands the delivery and take out process. Without this, the food can be tampered with and disorganized, and the operators run the risk of consumers being off-put by the food when they open the packaging.”

Brands simply cannot afford to allow consumers to be turned off in any way right now, and building an effective packaging strategy is something that should be top of mind. It’s no wonder that the top brands in the industry have long been tinkering with and perfecting their packaging—it’s imperative to the health of a brand, especially now. Packaging, more than ever, can make or break a brand.

“Everything, at this point, has the ability to aid in increasing the frequency of repeat sales,” says Nathan Foxx, director of category management at **R3 Redistribution**. “Packaging greatly assists in this. Remember, people eat with their eyes first. The entire experience is more critical now than it ever has been in our entire lifetime.”



“If you value the food you prepare, we believe you should also value how it’s packaged and served.”



for home delivery is not the answer. Developing a packaging plan to meet consumer food expectations will help operators grow and maintain off-premise sales.”

Another mistake experts caution against is creating menu items without considering the food’s journey. The two should be designed in tandem, with chefs even going so far as to taste-test products as though they are the guest—packaging and all.

Thomas Buchberg, executive vice president of global operations at **GreenDustries**, concurs, adding that an investment in packaging during the research and development process is simply a consistent practice that shows guests you care.

“You see some operators focus on saving a penny for cheaper packaging and not consider the value of the customer’s dining experience,” Buchberg says. “If you value the food you prepare, we believe you



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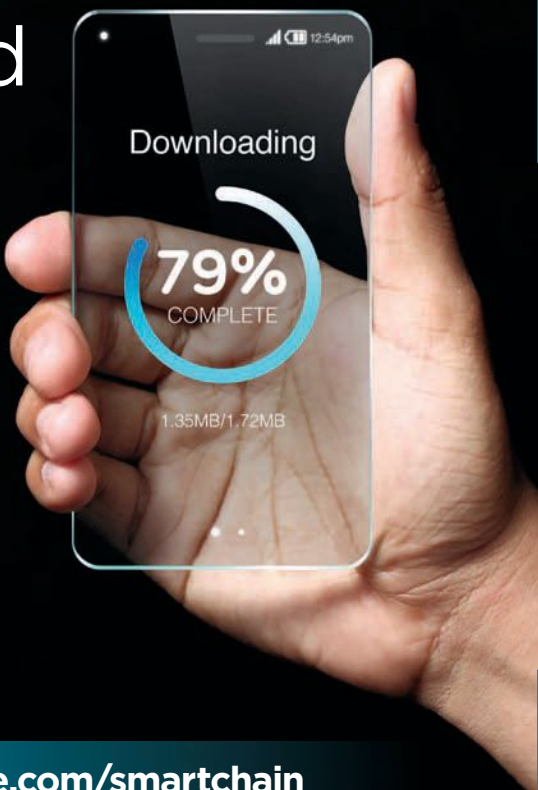


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